

THE CONVERSATION



Boaty McBoatface poll shows how not to do community consultation

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Not Boaty McBoatface? EPA/NERC/AAP

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Britain's Natural Environment Research Council has wrapped up its internet poll seeking a name from the public for its new research ship, with "Boaty McBoatface" the clear winner.

The Council sparked off an internet storm by crowdsourcing the name, and it now looks like it will ignore the popular suggestion, instead opting for "something that fits the mission and captures the spirit of scientific endeavour".

The NERC is not the first organisation to come unstuck by asking for public input.

"Community consultation" has become one of the most common trends in the contemporary managerial playbook. It seems like whatever decision your organisation needs to make, the advice is to "consult" community stakeholders. Want to expand your product line? Consult the community. Need to move premises? Consult the community. Thinking about updating the colour scheme in the boardroom? You know what to do...

But if you ask for community input to an organisational decision, you'd better be prepared for what you get or risk losing your organisational credibility.

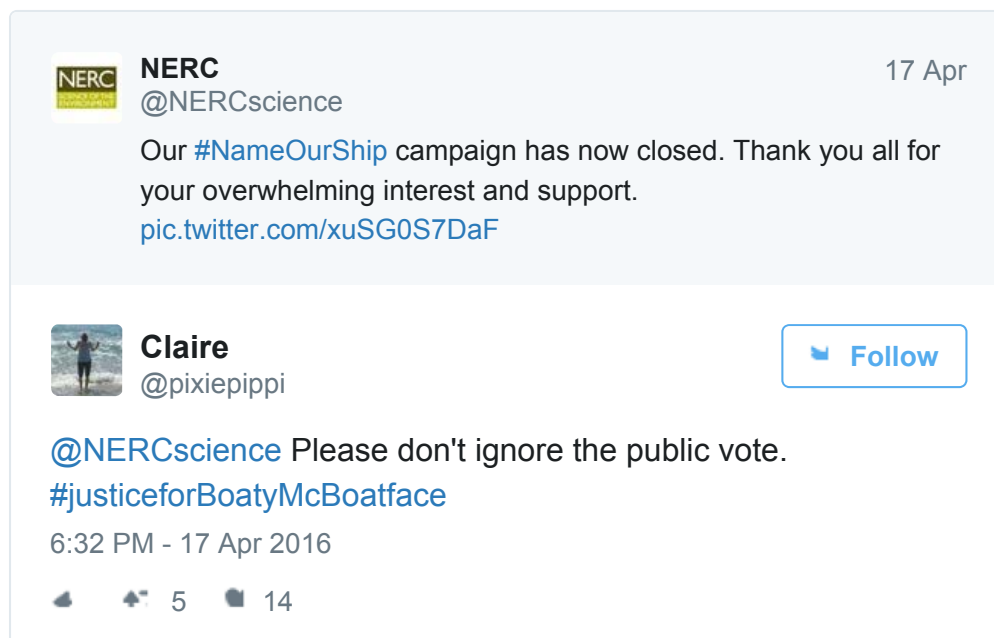
The NERC's response to irreverent but popular suggestions like Boaty McBoatface or RRS It's bloody cold here, has outraged those who thought the name with the most votes would win.



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Our [#NameOurShip](#) campaign has now closed. Thank you all for



Organisational representatives have desperately been drawing attention to the fact that they only asked for suggestions for the boat's name, and have always been consistent in advising people that the final decision would be made by a panel chosen by the NERC.

In some ways this story is reminiscent of the 2009 debacle over iSnack 2.0, an attempt by Kraft to consult the community in its name search for a new blend of Vegemite and cream cheese. In that case the panel decision from among community suggestions resulted in a huge backlash of negativity.

As with Kraft, some cynics have suggested the furore resulting from the NERC's behaviour was in fact a deliberate attempt to gain publicity by and for the organisation.

This theory gained traction when it was discovered the person who suggested Boaty McBoatface – although not employed by the NERC – is a public relations professional. However it isn't clear what the NERC could possibly gain from this tidal wave of publicity, much of it critical of the organisation's apparent reluctance to go with the flow of public opinion.

Lessons for other organisations

So how can an organisation avoid the whirlpool into which the NERC seems to have fallen?

First, be absolutely certain you really do want to consult community members, as opposed to provide them with information. Consultation implies a degree of responsiveness and power sharing that you need to be comfortable with. Organisations that are not clear on these distinctions would do well to refer to the spectrum of public participation produced by the internationally-recognised International Association for Public Participation.

Second, be clear about any non-negotiable boundaries to your consultation. Be upfront about them and repeat them often. Saying afterwards you made it clear in the fine print that the decision would be yours regardless of what community members really want doesn't help when stakeholders are excited to see the impact of their input. This sounds like sour grapes, and smacks of an elitist approach to organisational decision making that could be seen as being at odds with the concept of consultation.

Think about whether you might be better off providing community members with the chance to make a guided choice from a number of options that your organisation finds acceptable. This is what Kraft eventually did after its iSnack 2.0 fiasco.

Finally, if you do find yourself backed into a corner through consultation, think carefully about how to respond. Crying foul over the outcome of a democratic process that you have initiated won't make your organisation look good. Even worse, such a response could damage the credibility of consultation as an important component of the managerial toolkit generally.



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